



# Trees and scrub

Commons Factsheet No. 10

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# Trees and scrub

Over the centuries, the trees and scrub that grew on commons and greens have been used by people for firewood and building. Alongside other traditional uses such as grazing, this meant that commons and greens stayed relatively open and did not become more wooded as would naturally happen without some kind of intervention. With traditional commoning practices ceasing on many commons, tree and scrub cover has often increased dramatically. This factsheet offers guidance on making decisions as to how much tree and scrub cover to retain, how much to clear, and how to do it.

## A historical view...

Commons have always varied in the amount and type of trees and scrub they support depending on the local soils and climate and of course on how much they were cut or grazed. Trees and scrub were scarce or even absent on many commons in the past because grazing was the predominant land use. Generally, grazing rights were held by the commoners and mineral rights by the landowner (usually in the past the lord of the manor); trees might be used by both: often timber was reserved for the lord whilst smaller wood (branches and scrub) could also be used by commoners. Sometimes there were quotas for taking of wood for various uses – fuel, fencing, buildings and equipment.

The expected conflict between grazing animals and growing trees was avoided by cutting trees above the height the animals could reach. The tree would produce a crop of new branches – for fuel, timber or sometimes fodder for animals - which could be cut after a period of time to be replaced by more. This was called pollarding and old trees of this character and other wide crowned, old trees are a sure sign that the common used to be

managed as ‘wood-pasture’ so that it could provide produce from the trees as well as grazing. Regular pollarding had the effect of extending the life of a tree and many of our oldest veteran trees have been pollarded.

Today, pollards and other open-grown trees are often surrounded by a dense growth of younger trees – tall and thin (unlike the old trees) because they have been competing for light as they have grown. You may also find trees with many stems at ground level showing they were cut low down (coppiced) in the past. Where this occurred on common land temporary fencing was generally constructed to allow re-growth for a few years before domestic stock were allowed to enter.



Ancient pollarded oak at Phoenix Green, Hampshire

## Recent change...

Grazing and cutting scrub and wood kept commons open and rarely did they have the dense growth that is such a significant feature of many of today's commons. With the decline in commoning, trees and scrub have taken over many formerly open sites, although in relation to the lifetime of the commons, these have been recent changes – over the last 100-150 years. This has had consequences on landscape, wildlife, archaeology and amenity.



Photographs taken in 1920 and 2006 of Frensham, Surrey showing the changed character of the common behind the War Memorial.

### Landscape

Clearly growth of scrub and trees has a major effect on landscape but whether this improves it is a subjective decision. Many a common has changed from stark bareness to take on a softer aspect as scrub and trees have advanced – a change in character that some would appreciate and others not. For the visitor to a site, dense growth tends to separate it from the wider landscape, reducing the views but sometimes giving more impact to those that remain.

### Wildlife

The open landscapes of our commons and greens - their grasslands and heathlands -

usually have a much longer continuity than the woodland that may now grow on them.

They have endured in their openness for hundreds, perhaps even a thousand years, and have very often avoided agricultural intensification, unlike similar habitats that were part of the enclosed landscape (see FS3 Why does our common need to be looked after?). So commons and greens hold a unique preserve of communities of plants and animals that have developed over a very long period of time and which consequently are remarkably rich and complex and support many scarce species.

The flower-rich grassland found on commons and greens has vast variation in character

according to soil and climate. Heaths, moors and mires show a similar range and every site is unique but part of a fascinating continuum. It is open habitats like these, conserved by grazing and fuel gathering, that have been lost, as scrub and trees have advanced when these activities ceased.

Unlike 'ancient woodland' which has existed for many centuries, newly established woodland which has developed in recent years (often referred to as 'secondary woodland') is markedly poorer in wildlife than the long-established open habitats it has replaced. Additionally the extra water the new woodland can extract from the soil and the shade it produces can adversely affect the open areas that remain, including ponds and other open water.

'Scrub' comes in many guises. It can be shrubs such as gorse and bramble on acid grassland and heathland; blackthorn on clay soils or alongside hawthorn, privet, dogwood and wayfaring tree on chalk and limestone. Scrub can also be young trees such as birch, pine, oak, ash and sycamore.

Scrub is often a great benefit for wildlife. It provides food for many insects and song posts and nesting places for birds. However, left unmanaged it can completely take over valuable open areas and often is the precursor of new woodland, bringing a fundamental change in character.

Old and veteran trees, if they exist, can be an especially important wildlife resource. Their value comes from a number of features. The dead wood on them and beneath them is a natural part of the ageing process and supports a huge variety of fungi and invertebrates.

It has been estimated that more than 1600 species of invertebrate depend on dead wood in the UK and many of them are very specialist and consequently rare. The tree's surface can support interesting and scarce mosses and lichens and holes and fissures provide roosting and nesting sites for bats and birds.



**Veteran oak with dead wood, cavities and sap-runs – all valuable for wildlife – Royal Common, Surrey**

## Archaeology

Growth of trees and scrub, even bracken, on an unmanaged common or green can cover barrows, banks, trackways and similar features and make them less easy to see and appreciate. Over time, tree roots and bracken rhizomes can disrupt the soil layers and large trees can blow over, pulling up earth with their root-plates with catastrophic effects on archaeology beneath.

## Amenity

Commons vary greatly in the extent to which they are visited by people. The proximity of a community and the availability of car parking are often important determining factors but some commons are obviously more attractive to visitors than others.

The amount and distribution of woodland and



scrub can have a big influence on whether a common or green is good to visit. Open areas are appreciated by many visitors, often as a contrast to more enclosed parts. The beauty of trees and woodland, perhaps at particular times of year – bluebells in spring or leaf colour in autumn for example - is also much loved. Many people though are less comfortable walking paths that are enclosed by dense vegetation.

## How many trees, how much scrub...?

So to find the right balance between trees, scrub and open spaces on your common or green, you will want to consider the interests of wildlife, landscape, people and archaeology. Relevant factsheets to help you make your decision include *FS3 Why does our common need to be looked after*, *FS4 Getting started*, *FS6 How important is our common?*, and *FS8 How to manage different habitats*.

If you are lucky enough to have some really old trees on your common or green it is important that they are cared for and given the best chance to live much longer still (see *FS8 How to manage different habitats*). Getting help, below, suggests plenty of sources of further information.

## Wood – sell it, give it away or let it rot?

Often there is a significant value in finding outlets for the products of managing tree-cover. This might be selling timber or woodchips, either marketed on behalf of the common, or by the contractor who discounts it from the cost of the contract.

Waste wood for firewood can be greatly valued by local people, and can be part of a long-standing connection they have with a common. It can also be a useful way to involve new people. Sometimes commons are regularly gleaned of wood and anything cut and left soon disappears. This can mean there is a great scarcity of dead wood which,

**A Felling Licence** will normally be needed if you are planning to fell trees but there are some exemptions. Within a calendar quarter you are allowed without a licence to fell trees up to a volume of 5 cubic metres for timber for your own use - this is equivalent to one large oak tree per quarter.

For information on other exemptions, see the Forestry Commission website. If anything is unclear, the Forestry Commission Private Woodlands Officer at your area office will be able to help. It is advisable anyway to discuss your proposals with the Forestry Commission.

Normally there is a condition to replant after trees are felled under licence. This would be at odds with the restoration of open areas like grassland and heathland but the Forestry Commission can remove this condition if it is satisfied that there is justification and that there will be appropriate care of the open habitat.

as explained earlier, can be very important for wildlife. In such cases it is often worth leaving cut material in large pieces to deter removal.

## Getting help

Plenty of help and advice can be found for communities wishing to manage land. If your site has designations for nature conservation or archaeology, then there are statutory bodies which will need to be consulted and can advise (see *FS6 How important is our common?*).

Where there are no designations, your local Wildlife Trust will be able to help with advice on aspects of tree and scrub management that are related to wildlife conservation. This could include guidance on the relative value of different tree species for wildlife, which (if any) species to remove, and which species are suitable for planting in the location. Your Wildlife Trust could also advise on the

positioning of bird or bat boxes in trees. Your local authority may have a tree officer who could also help, especially if you have any concerns about tree health and the implications there may be for public safety.

Remember the value of deadwood as a wildlife habitat which should be retained, unless there is a genuine safety case for removal. Your tree officer could also advise on any markets for wood produce.

Commercial contractors can also be asked to advise and quote for work, especially if the job is more than volunteers could tackle, either because of the size of the task or the need for specialist skills – and tree work is a highly skilled and potentially dangerous job. There are many such tree surgeons and contractors available - word of mouth recommendation is usually a good guide, so ask around in your community.

If your intended tree work involves any felling, especially of more than a minor amount (see boxes), or if you are looking to plant many new trees and need to explore the possibility of any grants available, then the Forestry Commission is your best point of contact. Remember too that many groups elsewhere are likely to have dealt with similar issues on commons or greens, so try looking at the websites for particular sites, or 'Friends' groups.

Volunteers such as these are always happy to share their experiences and warn of any pitfalls; and the accounts of successes and the scale of projects undertaken by other groups can be truly inspirational!



Secondary woodland on Horsell Common

Local authorities can place **Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs)** on individual trees, groups of trees and even occasionally woodlands to protect them from removal or damage. It is clearly important to find out whether any are present and this can be done by contacting your council.

TPOs can be time-limited or indefinite; the council may remove TPOs if the circumstances which led to their placement have changed. It is open to you to suggest that the council places a TPO on trees which you feel are particularly valuable or could be at risk.

Sometimes existing TPOs may be at odds with good management of the trees and in those cases it will be necessary to discuss your proposals with the council. Information on TPOs can be found at the Communities and Local Government website and a useful summary is available from Naturenet.

The **Woodland Grant Scheme** lasts 5 years and removes the need for regular felling licence applications because management is in an agreed scheme. There is financial support for regeneration, replanting, conservation work and provision of public access. Details are on the Forestry Commission website.

An **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** might be required by the Forestry Commission if you apply for a felling licence. There are special requirements for 'sensitive areas' e.g. SSSIs.

Refer to the information on the FC website and discuss your plans with your Private Woodlands Officer.

## Sources of further information

Tiptree heath

■ [www.tiptreeheath.co.uk](http://www.tiptreeheath.co.uk)

Tree Preservation Orders

■ [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/tposguide](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/tposguide)

Naturenet

■ [www.naturenet.net/trees/](http://www.naturenet.net/trees/)

Forestry Commission

■ [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk)

Woodland Trust and Ancient Tree Forum

■ [www.woodland-trust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum/](http://www.woodland-trust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum/)

## Credits

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